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SUBJECT: NEW PRC "AL-JAZEERA-LIKE" NEWS CHANNEL AIMS TO
BOOST CHINA'S IMAGE

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Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Aubrey Carlson.
Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) Still smarting from the public relations
bloody nose they received in the international media
during 2008's Tibet riots and the Olympic torch run,
Communist Party leaders hope to improve China's
image overseas by spending large sums of money on
state media outlets' international operations,
according to contacts in Beijing and press reports.
A new international TV news channel run by the
official Xinhua News Agency and modeled after Al-
Jazeera is to be the centerpiece of the new program.
China Central Television (CCTV) will receive a
portion of the funds for more overseas bureaus and
foreign language programming, though many at CCTV
are unhappy with Xinhua's incursion into their TV
broadcasting territory. Hong Kong media claim the
plan includes RMB 45 billion (USD 6.6 billion) in
new spending, but other sources say numbers are not
yet set. The plan also reportedly includes support
for more English-language print media. A contact at
the Global Times hopes his newspaper will receive
some of the new money to support a new English-
language edition, which will start publication April
120. Other contacts were highly skeptical that this
new spending will translate into greater influence
over international public opinion because of Chinese
state media's inherent weaknesses, which include
censorship and a dearth of talented journalists.
Others resented the plan's lack of transparency,
arguing that cloistered and uncompetitive state
behemoths like Xinhua and CCTV are poor choices to
build new media outlets of real international
stature. End Summary.

CHINA'S AL-JAZEERA?

12. (SBU) China plans to spend RMB 45 billion (USD
6.6 billion) to expand China's international media
presence and improve the PRC's image abroad,
according to a January 13 report in the independent
Hong Kong newspaper South China Morning Post (SCMP)
(ref A). Though China's official media has not
confirmed the RMB-45-billion figure, several
Beijing-based media contacts said the PRC government
had initiated a large spending program aimed at
increasing China's "speaking rights" (huayu quan) in
the global media market. The largest component of
this plan is a 24-hour television news channel to be
operated by the Xinhua News Agency and modeled after

Al-Jazeera and CNN. The station, according to Hong Kong media reports, will likely have its headquarters outside mainland China, possibly in Singapore. Chinese media contacts outside of Hong Kong, however, told us that much about the proposed satellite TV station remained unknown, including its budget and the ratio of Chinese- to non-Chinese-language programming. The Hong Kong-based Phoenix Weekly magazine, in a March 14 story on the media expansion campaign, said Xinhua has been aggressively recruiting television journalists in preparation for this new project.

MORE XINHUA BUREAUS

¶3. (C) In addition to the new global news channel, the plan includes investment to expand the number of Xinhua's overseas bureaus from the current 100 to ¶186. Cheng Mingxia (protect), international editor at the Economic Observer newspaper (Jingji Guancha Bao), told PolOff March 25 that her friends at Xinhua had confirmed this expansion of foreign bureaus. Cheng said that as part of this program, Xinhua was increasing pay packages and benefits for its journalists overseas.

MONEY FOR ENGLISH PAPERS AND MAGAZINES?

¶4. (C) In addition to giving new resources to Xinhua, the government is encouraging newspapers to

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expand their English-language content, though it is uncertain how much of the new money will be dedicated to this. According to the SCMP and Phoenix Weekly, the China News Service, an official news wire aimed at overseas Chinese, may receive up to RMB two billion (USD 194 million), with some of these funds going to support a new English-language edition of China Newsweek (Zhongguo Xinwen Zhoukan). In a conversation with PolOff April 1, however, China Newsweek Editor-in-Chief Qin Lang (protect) downplayed these reports. Qin stressed that even though China Newsweek was published by China News Service, his magazine operated as an independent commercial entity and "just because the China News Service gets money does not mean that we will." Qin commented that China's government had "more money than most," though he expressed considerable skepticism that state-run organs, rather than commercially run media, were best positioned to explain China to the rest of the world. Qin predicted that China's official media would use "traditional methods" (i.e., propaganda) in approaching this project. Liu Wanyuan (protect), chief editor of China Newsweek's English-language edition, called the SCMP story "misleading" and said the English-language edition had been in the planning stages for three years and was thus unrelated to the RMB-45-billion campaign. (Note: The China Newsweek English-language edition, called "News China," started publication in New York in August 2008 and, according to Liu, will begin publication in China sometime in 2009.)

GLOBAL TIMES GOES GLOBAL

¶5. (C) The Global Times (Huanqiu Shibao), an international news daily run by the CCP's flagship newspaper People's Daily, is also preparing to launch an English-language edition. The English Global Times, according to contacts at the paper, would begin publication April 20 and compete with

the China Daily, a paper run by the State Council Information Office that is currently China's only official, nationally distributed English-language daily. Global Times International Forum Editor Wang Wen (protect) told PolOff March 19 that, contrary to popular belief, the decision to start an English-language edition predated the RMB-45-billion spending plan. Now that the Party had decided to make such large new investment in international media, however, the Global Times hoped that it would receive some of these funds to support this new venture. During EmbOffs' visit to the Global Times offices March 25, Wang and other editors said that the paper had hired 10 foreigners to work on the English-language edition. These foreign editors, they said, would play a role in choosing content, rather than merely polishing English-language copy. Initially the Global Times English edition would be published only in China, but they later planned to distribute it overseas.

PLAN BORN OF PR DISASTERS OF 2008

¶6. (C) Zhou Qing'an (protect), Director of Tsinghua University's Public Diplomacy Research Program and an editorial writer for The Beijing News (Xinjing Bao), told PolOff March 11 the international media expansion was a direct result of the negative Western media reporting of the March 2008 Lhasa riots and the subsequent Olympic torch relay. Zhou said that during a Party meeting convened soon after the August 2008 Olympic Games, CCP General Secretary Hu Jintao had directed the Party Propaganda Department to come up with a plan to expand China's international media influence. Hu and other top-level leaders had since made repeated calls for China's media to boost its overseas audience. Hu himself, in a December 20 congratulatory letter marking China Central Television's (CCTV) 50th anniversary, said China should "actively build a modern media system and further raise (our) broadcasting ability domestically and overseas." Speaking at the CCTV anniversary celebration the same day, Li Changchun, a Politburo Standing Committee member with overall authority over China's propaganda system, said he hoped China's television industry "will serve domestic and overseas audiences

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both, instead of serving domestic ones only." In a January 1 article in the Party journal Qiushi (Seeking Truth, ref B), CCP Propaganda Department Director Liu Yunshan argued "in the final analysis, the competition of the press and public opinion is a contest for the right of speech (huayu quan de zhengduo)." China, Liu added, had to "build world-class media that covers the globe with multiple languages, a large audience and abundance of information and huge influence."

"NARROW DEFINITION" OF SOFT POWER

¶7. (C) Yu Tiejun (protect), General Secretary of Peking University's Center for International and Strategic Studies, told PolOff March 27 that the campaign reflected the Party's new emphasis on "soft power." China's leadership nevertheless maintained a "narrow" definition of soft power that was largely confined to propaganda and "how to persuade Western people." China's leadership still viewed the projection of soft power as primarily a government-led endeavor rather than something done by society as a whole. While Yu said he felt it was good that the Chinese leadership was paying more attention to

public diplomacy and was willing to invest more funds to enhance China's overseas image, he expressed concern over whether the money would be spent efficiently. Tsinghua's Zhou was even more pessimistic, describing the plan as a "huge waste of money" that was unlikely to fundamentally change Western perceptions of China. Zhou said the Party had brought in several "media specialists" from academia as advisors to the RMB-45-billion project. These scholars were mostly experts on the business side of media management, not in journalism. Zhou said this indicated that propaganda officials were paying very little attention to content even as they prepared to spend billions to create new international media outlets.

18. (C) Peking University Assistant Professor (and frequent contributor to Global Times) Yu Wanli (protect) leveled similar criticisms at the government's approach. In an article he wrote for Global Times in March (but which has not yet been accepted for publication) he argued that China was at a severe disadvantage when competing with the West "on the propaganda front" because Western ideas were disseminated organically through thousands of small and large media and civil society organizations. Chinese ideas, by contrast, were disseminated domestically and internationally through one channel, the state, and this "unnatural/inorganic" (bu tianran de) source reduced their impact. Yu told PolOff that he had recommended in his article that China encourage the free development of civil society, because without the "natural, organic" flow of Chinese ideas, China's "great power diplomacy" would inevitably fail.

SOME AT CCTV FEEL SHUT OUT

19. (C) According to some Hong Kong press reports, at least some of the new funding will go to CCTV to support more foreign-language programming and more overseas bureaus. In 2007, CCTV launched new channels in Spanish and French. In a webchat on the People's Daily website January 8, CCTV Party Secretary Zhang Haige said that in 2009 CCTV planned to hire 100 new employees skilled in "minor languages" to supplement the new Russian- and Arabic-language channels. Zhang said CCTV also planned to hire more foreign nationals to work at the network's overseas bureaus. Though CCTV would receive some of the RMB 45 billion in new investment, Zhou Qing'an told PolOff, many CCTV executives opposed Xinhua's entry into the television business. Li Xiaoping (protect), a senior producer for CCTV's international English-language channel CCTV-9, told PolOff January 20 that the new international media expansion plan had "angered many at CCTV-9." Despite being China's only news channel aimed primarily at an international audience, CCTV-9 executives had not been consulted and "nobody bothered to ask for our views." Li was uncertain whether CCTV-9 would

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receive any of the proposed RMB 45 billion in funding. With additional funds, she said, CCTV-9 would open more foreign bureaus. Currently CCTV-9 only had bureaus in London and Washington, which, Li said, was not enough to make the station competitive as a news outlet.

"JUST GIVE THE MONEY TO PHOENIX TV"

¶10. (C) Beijing-based journalists generally predicted that a Xinhua-run television station would not be able to produce the kind of content that would attract a wide global audience. Wang Chong (protect), a journalist who recently resigned from the Communist Youth League newspaper China Youth Daily, was especially scathing in his critique of the plan. It would be "impossible," Wang said, for China to follow the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) model of a government-affiliated broadcaster that nevertheless reported news independently. A Chinese government-backed television channel, even one aspiring to gain influence in the international market, would still be constrained by censorship. "It would be better if they just gave all the money to Phoenix TV," Wang said, referring to the PRC-affiliated Hong Kong-based satellite news channel that, while considered pro-CCP, is nevertheless popular in the Chinese-speaking world.

¶11. (C) Zhong Weizhi (protect), editor-in-chief of the Economic Observer (Jingji Guancha Bao), told PolOff March 25 that while the government had not publicly confirmed the RMB-45-billion figure, the program to expand China's international media presence was underway, even if few knew the exact details. Like other Chinese journalists PolOffs spoke with, Zhong was skeptical that such spending would translate into a greater "voice" for China internationally. China's state-run propaganda organs were not well prepared to operate "global media." The venture was unlikely to succeed, Zhong said, because the content of China's state-run media was still "too traditional" and unappealing to a global audience. Even increasing the number of Xinhua bureaus overseas would have little effect, he said. "Without changing the content, the money will come to nothing."

MORE PROPAGANDA NOT THE ANSWER

¶12. (C) Lu Yuegang (protect), a journalist for China Youth Daily who was demoted in 2006 from his position as deputy editor of the paper's outspoken Freezing Point supplement, told PolOff March 12 that, censorship issues aside, China did not have the talent pool necessary to produce quality journalism. "China discourages good journalism and does not reward good reporters," Lu said. "The government is essentially saying that 'our propaganda has been ineffective, so let's do more propaganda.'" Lu said the RMB-45-billion program amounted to "throwing money at the least competitive elements (Xinhua and CCTV) in China's media industry."

¶13. (C) Other journalists criticized the lack of transparency surrounding decisions to allocate the new funding. Zhang Shensi (protect), international editor at the Legal Daily (Fazhi Ribao), a newspaper run by the Ministry of Justice, said many of her colleagues at the Legal Daily were "not happy" with the decision to give most of the money to Xinhua, People's Daily/Global Times and CCTV. "On what basis do you give them this money? This is taxpayer money, after all, so what are the criteria for who gets what?" Zhang predicted Legal Daily would not receive any of the RMB 45 billion. Like other contacts, Zhang was skeptical about Xinhua's ability to run an internationally competitive television channel. Xinhua, Zhang noted, enjoyed a monopoly in China's domestic media market, and Chinese papers, including Legal Daily, "have no choice but to use them." For all its resources, Zhang said, Xinhua did not produce much by way of original content, relying heavily on recycling news and photos from foreign news services, especially the Associated

Press. For the international media expansion to be successful, Zhang added, China would need to

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reorient its traditional view that propaganda was about "selling" China to foreign audiences and instead concentrate on generating content of real value.

¶14. (C) Li, the CCTV-9 producer, said expanding China's international media influence would be difficult "not because of hardware but because of software." The ideological and political content of CCTV-9 turned off foreign viewers, she said, and any new station backed by the Chinese government would inevitably face similar constraints. Though Li said she felt the media expansion plan was misguided, she added that it would likely bring personal benefits to herself and the handful of Chinese journalists who specialized in English-language media. "We are suddenly viewed as more important by the leadership. Before, we were treated as third-class citizens."

PICCUTA